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**Testimony in Support of LD 55:  
An Act To Protect Minority Religious Groups by Eliminating the  
Prior Approval Requirement for a School Absence  
for a Recognized Religious Holiday**

Good morning Senator Daughtry, Representative Brennan, and my colleagues on the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. I am Justin Fecteau and I proudly represent House District 86, which consists of the western and northern portions of Augusta.

In 20-A MRSA §3272, the list of excused absences are:

- A. Personal health, including the person's physical, mental and behavioral health;
- B. An appointment with a health professional that must be made during the regular school day and the absence has prior approval;
- C. Observance of a recognized religious holiday when the observance is required during the regular school day and the absence has prior approval;
- D. A family emergency; or
- E. A planned absence for a personal or educational purpose that has prior approval.

My simple bill requests that, in Section C, the words “and the absence has prior approval” be stricken from statute.

As you have noticed, Sections B, C, and E require prior approval in state statute. My experience in traditional public schools as a teacher lends me to believe that only planned absences in Section E are living up to state statute. Students will go from teacher-to-teacher with a form to inform them of their planned absence, whether it be for an educational field trip or something as simple as moose hunting.

By and large, schools are not doing this for planned medical appointments and recognized religious holidays. However, a parent may call the school on the morning of a medical appointment to indicate the student will be late or needs to leave early. My bill only targets recognized religious

holidays, because I know there are reasons why a school may need to be aware of a student's well-being prior to a medical appointment since it may be connected with their educational accommodations. It also begins a conversation on how the school can best support the student going forward.

Requiring a student to declare their intent to attend a religious service opens up an unnecessary can of worms within a school setting. Firstly, getting prior approval for a religious event - in my opinion - is akin to a religious test, because "approval" inherently indicates that a request could be denied. Secondly, a student and the student's family may feel that they may be poked and prodded for information regarding their faith.

Thirdly, the current wording of the state statute unfairly targets our state's most devout Christian students, as well as our non-Christian students. The school calendar already accounts for the major events on the Christian calendar. Students who practice their faith more regularly may be impacted for services such as Ash Wednesday, for example. Non-Christian students, such as Muslims, are making up strong minorities in the metropolitan areas of places like Portland, Lewiston/Auburn, and Augusta. Their religious calendar is not exactly aligned with the school calendar. Requesting prior approval for religious services would create all kinds of issues, especially for those families with extreme language barriers, which is common among our newest community members.

Again, schools have largely recognized this and are already not following state statute to its original intent. I think it's time that state statute aligns with the best practices in our schools.

Passing this bill would be a small indication of our willingness to create a more inclusive environment in our schools that follows the best practices our schools currently use.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Justin Fecteau', with a stylized, flowing script.

Rep. Justin Fecteau